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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000417

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL SL

SUBJECT: PARTY FRACAS ENDS IN VIOLENCE FOR JOURNALISTS

REF: FREETOWN 237

Classified By: Charge Glenn Fedzer for reason 1.4 b.

¶1. (U) Summary: An altercation between SLPP and APC supporters took a nasty turn on August 13, resulting in damage to the SLPP Headquarters and the Freetown City Council Offices, looting, and injuries. Sierra Leone Police (SLP) on hand for crowd control allegedly intensified the situation by firing tear gas canisters into the crowd and SLPP building, and for refusing to protect reporters at the scene. The crowds later moved to State House, where APC and SLPP leaders met to discuss an end to the violence and rancor between them. According to reports from various sources, protesters outside State House were beaten and chased by the SLP and members of the President's security team. Journalists observing the situation were also injured, and many had cameras, money, and phones stolen by members of the security forces and protesters. Though party politics have continued to play out in this post-election period via small-scale protests and skirmishes, this is an unusual and troubling event that will have larger implications for inter-party relations and media freedom. However, immediate action to investigate the incidents and prevent their recurrence is a positive sign that, regardless of party affiliation, Sierra Leoneans are ultimately committed to peace. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On August 13, SLPP and APC supporters clashed during a political procession celebrating the inauguration of Freetown's newly elected mayor. Supporters of the Mayor, an APC member, marched past the SLPP offices on their way to take up residence at the Freetown City Council building. Exchanges of insults between party members denigrated into physical clashes, with the SLPP alleging that APC members stormed their headquarters and looted office supplies. Unity Radio, the SLPP station that broadcasts from the site, urged SLPP members to immediately come to their aid, stating that supporters should observe the "APC brutality." The SLP arrived on the scene and controlled the situation by cordoning off the location and firing tear gas into the crowd, which eventually dispersed.

¶3. (U) In the afternoon, senior members of the SLPP were invited to State House to discuss the incident with the ruling government. As party leaders met, supporters from both sides demonstrated at State House, chanting for peace and unity. Journalists on the scene reported that State House security requested that the demonstrators move some distance away from the main building, and were attacked by security and SLP officers while doing so. Journalists also found themselves under attack, allegedly by the security forces and SLP for either being members of the SLPP party or for recording their malfeasance. Seven journalists ultimately came forward, claiming to have been injured and robbed. They claim this happened even after they made clear that they are members of the press.

¶4. (C) The details surrounding both events are blurred. At the behest of SLPP Secretary-General Jacob Jusu Saffa, CDA,

Poloff, and Information Assistant visited the SLPP headquarters on the afternoon of August 13 to observe the damage allegedly caused by APC members and SLP forces. Evidence of a struggle was clear, including small drops of blood on the floors, broken windows, and tear gas still present in the air. SLPP claims that the police fired tear gas canisters at the windows, however, weren't categorically proven. Though quick to show Emboffs canisters next to broken windows, it wasn't conclusive that the damage and canisters were fresh, with some evidence that the damage was staged prior to Emboffs arrival.

¶15. (U) Circumstances surrounding the altercation at State House is also unclear. Sources close to SLP leadership stated that the heavy-handed nature of their use of force is at least partially being blamed on slurs and provocations from the "peace-loving" crowd. Reports also vary widely on who carried out the majority of the violence: the SLP or the State House security team, a controversial group comprised of ex-combatants with questionable reputations. Partisanship on all sides is skewing reports, making it a challenge to determine the facts and where the majority of the blame should fall.

¶16. (U) Despite this murkiness, action is being taken to address the situation. The APC and SLPP released a joint statement on August 13 condemning the violence and calling for non-violence and political tolerance. The Human Rights Commission issued a press release, requesting that political parties behave responsibly and security forces act in accordance with their Code of Conduct. The SLP have set up an investigation team comprised of representatives from its

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Complaint Discipline and Internal Investigations Department and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to consider the alleged attacks against journalists specifically. The team will submit its findings to the Attorney General no later than September 15, 2008.

¶17. (U) An unintended impact of this event may be the closure of the two parties' radio stations. Earlier this year (reftel), controversy was sparked the Minister of Communications silenced the SLPP station, Unity Radio, for failing to register or install its equipment according to published guidelines. Though this situation devolved into a finger-point exercise between the APC and SLPP, solutions were ultimately found that allowed Unity Radio to resume broadcasting with great fanfare and bipartisan support. That incident, however, coupled with this most recent event and the broadcast of inflammatory party rhetoric has led some to question whether Sierra Leone is mature enough to support partisan media. Radio is a particularly powerful tool in Sierra Leone, and members of civil society have noted in press interviews that it has been used in other African countries, like Rwanda, to encourage lawlessness and war. Given the heated and overblown reporting from Unity Radio during the August 13 incident, which was directly responsible for drawing larger crowds to the scene, it is possible that ethical, responsible reporting may not be the mission or objective of either Unity Radio or We Yone, the APC station. One potential alternative to the closures being advocated by the press and party leadership is to eliminate call-in talk shows, which many believe would stop much of the inflammatory language. Further discussions on the fate of the radio stations is expected over the next few weeks, with the involvement of the Independent Media Commission as well as the Political Parties Registration Commission.

¶18. (U) Comment: This incident is yet another in a spate of small-scale partisan disturbances across the country. Attention is increasingly being placed on these incidents, which can no longer be ignored or downplayed as isolated acts. The joint press release is a good sign that party leadership from both sides will work actively to support a message of peace, though how such a message will be absorbed

by their membership is questionable. The attacks on journalists by security forces is a cause for concern, but is tempered by the immediate response to investigate the event in conjunction with an independent organization. The incident as a whole throws an unflattering spotlight on party politics and security practices, but the willingness on all sides to take positive action to address concerns represents progress in a country where the effects of its brutal civil war are still highly visible. End comment.

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